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"Partnership for Peace: Building Long-term Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia"
The Second Collaborative Workshop on East Asia Regional Security Futures

THEATER MISSILE DEFENSE IN ASIADr. David M. Finkelstein *

ABSTRACT

The overarching argument in the paper is that the controversy over the future introduction of US TMD systems in the Asia-Pacific region is much more a function of the political baggage associated with these systems than their actual operational implications; specifically the issue of whether and to whom these systems might be transferred. Clearly this is the case in the context of the potential transfer of TMD to Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, to Japan. As the chief opponent of US TMD Beijing worries less about the ability of the systems to neutralize their missile forces than over their assessment that TMD transfer to Taiwan will inexorably lead to what they fear will result in "military relations creep" between Washington and Taipei.
A second major argument is that the original impetus for the US to develop TMD systems was *not*a function of developments in Asia. To the contrary, it began with a real and demonstrated threat to US forces by the proliferation *and actual use* of theater ballistic missiles against US forces in other parts of the world. Iraq's use of SCUD missiles during the Gulf War, and the fact that the single greatest loss of American life during that war was the result of an Iraqi SCUD was a watershed event for the US TMD program. Nevertheless, TMD became "an Asian issue" because Chinese and North Korean missile programs and launches justified the original decisions to move forward with the program after the fact.
Finally, it is argued that there will be no debate in the US over whether US forces should receive TMD when developed. No one in the US is going to argue that US forces *everywhere* should not have the protection against TBMs these systems promise. When fully developed TMD will likely be deployed with US forces around the world as a standard organic capability. Future TMD deployment to the Pacific Command, will *not* be used as a signal of US "strategic intent " to any country in Asia---specifically China or the DPRK. They no more signal intent at the strategic level than a sophisticated air defense (anti-aircraft) system. At the same time, the decisions surrounding the future sale or transfer of these systems to second parties will have strategic-level political-military implications.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about the U.S.'s Theater Ballistic Missile Defense programs, commonly referred to as TMD, are always difficult. They are difficult discussions because they revolve about highly complex technical systems the names and terminology of which frequently changes, and they are difficult discussions because more often than not they are also discussions about complex regional issues or strategic relationships. Often those who understand the technical complexities of TMD do not focus on the political implications of these systems and those whose concerns revolve about the political aspects of the systems do not fully understand the technical issues associated with TMD.
One thing is certain, however. It is hard to think of another example in recent memory of a conventional (non-nuclear related) defensive system that has accrued so much political baggage as has TMD.
What I will do today is to address some basics about TMD as a subject of discourse, some basics about TMD as a system, and some basics about its place in an Asian regional context. Also, some thoughts about China's concerns will be offered. Again, these are my views alone.

TMD AS A PUBLIC ISSUE IS A RECENT PHENOMENON

U.S. plans to develop and deploy a surface-to-air missile capable of shooting down a ballistic missile have been in motion for over a decade by now. The U.S. has had some systems such as Patriot in the field for quite some time. Other more advanced systems, or variants to existing systems, are still in the research, development, or testing stages. So as a military requirement that has generated hardware procurement decisions TMD is not a new issue.
For most of the past decade TMD as a military system with policy implications has remained an "inside the beltway" issue. It has been much discussed among the think tank crowd, it has been the focus of some international "Track 2" seminars, and it has certainly been discussed within U.S. Government and contractor circles. But until recently TMD had not really been an issue in the public eye here in the U.S. nor has it been the subject of wider public attention or debate such as National Missile Defense has become by now. This, I would assert, is explained by at least three reasons.
First, if the American public were polled on whether their armed forces deserve protection from theater ballistic missiles the likely response would be "yes." This is *not* a question that I suspect engenders a lot of controversy either in Washington or the American heartland.
Second, discussing TMD usually means a technical discussion about a highly complex family of weapons systems and their components, or debates among arms control specialists about whether upper-tier TMD systems will or will not be ABM Treaty compliant. Let's face it, few people among the general public want to enjoy their morning newspaper reading arcane discussions about the pros and cons of exo- versus endo-atmospheric interception, kinetic kill probabilities, or treaty compliant interceptor velocities.
The third reason TMD has not engendered wide public debate is that unlike National Missile Defense, TMD, in any of its variants, does not automatically raise questions about the future of international nuclear arms control regimes. TMD is a theater level system that aims to defend against conventional ballistic missiles, not nuclear weapons.
Over the past couple of years the low profile of TMD has changed somewhat, and TMD is in the news more often than before. As a news item it is no longer to be found only in the defense and trade weeklies or the arms control journals. Why the change? Because TMD is now being viewed through the lens of some very significant Asian security issues.
Clearly, TMD has become enmeshed in larger strategic discussions about how to deal with North Korea, what TMD may or may not mean as a factor in U.S.-China-Taiwan relations, its impact on the cross-Strait military balance, what TMD means for U.S. allies beyond Asia, and---most recently---whether (and to whom) these systems should (or should not) be sold. And certainly, China, which is the most vocal critic of TMD, has enjoyed some success in making TMD an issue through its vocal opposition to it.
Yet, I do not wish to overstate the case. It is true that the general public in the U.S. has read and will read more about TMD; but only in the context of other regional issues. TMD, I predict, will not become a major issue of *public* debate for the American public for two reasons. First, the degree to which the general public in the U.S. intensely and regularly follows regional security to the point that the ins and outs of TMD is a matter of general knowledge and discourse is likely negligible. And second, as I stated before, no one in the U.S. is going to argue that American forces should not have protection against conventional ballistic missiles if such a defense is feasible.
At the end of the day, the fact is that TMD for U.S. forces was not a political issue for the Clinton administration and it will not be a political issue for the new Bush administration.

U.S. TMD DID NOT START OUT AS AN ASIA ISSUE

One basic point that is often lost in the discussions about TMD in an Asian context is that developments in Asia were not the driving force behind the initial U.S. decisions to move forward with TMD.
The genesis of the U.S. TMD program is, in my view, explained by the confluence of two trends that go back more than a decade: one bureaucratic and one operational.
The bureaucratic trend was the slowdown in the late 1980s of the efforts of the old Strategic Defense Initiative Office (SDIO) created during the Reagan Administration. The operational trend was the concomitant rise in the late 1980s and early 1990s of the development, deployment, *and actual employment* of theater ballistic missiles around the world.
By now, many people have forgotten about the "War of the Cities" between Teheran and Baghdad, the SCUDs fired by Libya in 1986, the Iranian missile problem faced by the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf in the late 1980s, or the hundreds of Soviet SCUDs that were deployed in Afghanistan from 1988 to 1991. And clearly, if there was no real operational impetus for developing TMD prior to 1991 there certainly was one as a result of the Gulf War. According to BMDO data, during that conflict Iraq fired some 90 SCUDs against Saudi Arabia and a few against Israel as well.
And, very significant from a U.S. perspective, it must be reminded that the single greatest loss of life incurred by U.S. forces during the Gulf War was the result of an Iraqi SCUD attack.
It is worth pointing out that the very mixed performance of U.S. Army Patriot batteries against Iraqi SCUDs was due to the simple fact that the Patriot was not designed to be an anti-missile system. The Patriot deployed in the Gulf War was an anti-aircraft system. And it was clear from the Gulf war experience that the U.S. had best do something to deal with the very real threat of ballistic missiles. So, to a certain extent, Patriot and other U.S. TMD systems are not the "Son of Star Wars" as some have in the past derisively labeled it, but more properly, "Son of Sadaam."
Hence, the old SDIO organization transformed in the early 1990s into the current Ballistic Missile Defense Organization with a mandate to consider ways to deal with the emergent threat posed by theater ballistic missiles in general and to get some handle on the various TMD programs that were underway within the Services.
The point here is that the U.S. TMD program was driven by, and continues to be driven by, the perception---correctly, I believe---that a generic threat to U.S. forces exists in the form of theater ballistic missiles and that these missiles have spread to areas of the world in which the U.S. armed forces often operate or might operate.
The U.S. TMD program, in my opinion then, is not about any specific country or any particular region of the world.

TODAY TMD IS ALSO ABOUT ASIA

While the impetus behind TMD was not originally driven by Asian security scenarios TMD has today become almost synonymous with Asia within the circles of savants. It may also be worthwhile, then, to review some basics about why or how that happened.
Two relatively recent events, I would assert, made Asia a lightening rod for U.S. TMD programs: North Korea's launching of a Taepodong missile in August 1998 and the two instances of Chinese missile firings in the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and 1996.
First, North Korea. Even if one argues after the fact that the DPRK *Taepodong* launch in August 1998 was merely part of a satellite program, and not part of an offensive missile program, the point remains that the launch demonstrated a capability on the part of an often dangerously unpredictable regime. But most unnerving was the fact that the trajectory of the projectile was dangerously close to Japan.
The effect was nothing short of galvanizing within the Japanese government and upon Japanese popular opinion. It may not be too much of an overstatement to assert that Pyongyang's launch was the single most important factor in Japan's decision, after many years of internal deliberations, to join the U.S. in TMD research.
Second, it was China's missile launches in 1995 and 1996, however, turned the U.S. TMD program into a *cause celebre* within some circles in both Washington and Taipei.
Chinese interlocutors will argue intensely that Beijing's Taiwan Strait exercises and their accompanying missile launches in 1995 and 1996 were successful because both Taipei, Washington, and even Tokyo were finally made to understand how serious Beijing is about reunification with Taiwan and that China will brook no backsliding. In retrospect, measured against that criterion, they are correct. All concerned parties re-learned how serious China is about reunification. So Chinese arguments that their use of missiles was successful in that they helped to achieve a political objective is likely correct.
Also in retrospect, however, there is an argument to be made that China paid a dear price for the use of those missiles:
· The use of missiles by China, especially in 1995, likely enhanced popular support in Taiwan for Lee Teng-hui.
· The use of missiles certainly unnerved other countries in the region and fueled what the Chinese call the "so-called China threat."
· The use of missiles by Beijing were likely responsible in part for the U.S.'s dispatch of naval forces to the region and the subsequent deepening of the downturn in U.S.-China relations as a cycle of action and reaction spun about.
· In the U.S., at least as a general perception among the public due to extensive media coverage, the use of missiles made the letters "P-L-A" synonymous with missiles, and made reporting about Chinese missiles, counting Chinese missiles, and studying Chinese missiles a popular pastime among the media and political-military analysts in the U.S. and beyond.
Moreover, and clearly worrisome to Beijing, because of the missile launches TMD became an attractive system to many in Taipei. China posed a missile threat and TMD seemed on the surface to some on Taiwan a good potential solution. Equally worrisome from a Chinese perspective, their use of missiles also made TMD attractive to some in Washington, in and out of government, who are concerned about ensuring that U.S. obligations under the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act were met. Finally, the use of missiles by China, as well as the DPRK's missile launch, clearly provided U.S. defense contractors and U.S. Government TMD programmers with dramatic justifications for expensive systems long under development.
As a further result, then, of the Chinese missiles tests:
· TMD became an issue in Taiwan domestic politics; between some in the DPP and the former ruling KMT.
· TMD became a highly politicized issue in Washington resulting in Congressional pressures on the Executive Branch to at least think about how future TMD systems might be used to protect allies and others in Asia; to include Taiwan! (Witness the requirement in the FY 99 National Defense Authorization Act for DoD to produce a study on notional TMD architectures in Asia).
· TMD became a contentious issue in U.S.-Taiwan relations with respect to annual arms sales reviews.
· And, most important in my view, TMD, in conjunction with a whole host of other fractious issues became---and remains---another major point of contention in U.S.-China security relations.
Not surprisingly, then, the dynamics that today surround most discourse about TMD in an Asian context is really discussion that revolves around political issues much more than they revolve around operational issues. And in so doing, any understanding of the systems under discussion often seems, amazingly, to be less relevant than what these systems symbolize in terms of psychological reassurance, strategic intentions, or political resolve.

THREE COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT TMD

Back then to some of the "basics." Because discussions about TMD in Asia are often political discussions in disguise, there is often a good deal of misunderstanding about these systems and their capabilities. My own understanding of these systems is rudimentary at best, but there are probably three common misunderstandings that are worth pointing out.
The most common misunderstanding about TMD is, in my view, also the most important. Specifically, in many discussions about either the virtues or the dangers of these systems, TMD is often portrayed as a "magic system" that in a "stand alone" configuration or in some few multiples can solve one's potential incoming ballistic missile problem.
Even if we assume that the TMD systems under development will be able to perform as advertised---and we are not yet in a position to know if they will or will not--- the general thinking one hears from technical savants is that TMD will be most effective when it is part of a multi-layered air defense system comprised of standard air defense systems as well as various members of the TMD family of systems---envision if you will bubbles within bubbles of air defense coverage.
The point to make here is that the acquisition of a few TMD systems may provide some psychological succor to its owners but they may not necessarily solve one's ballistic missile problem by themselves.
A second point of common misunderstanding is that TMD systems *must* be "netted" to satellite systems, sensors, and a host of extra-battery systems to work. In other words, hypothetically, if a TMD system were sold to a second party, that second party would be dependant upon U.S.-controlled peripherals such as satellites for target acquisition and cueing.
This is untrue of lower-tier systems. These are designed as stand-alone point-defense systems. It is true that such peripherals could enhance the capabilities of upper-tier systems, but my understanding is that this is not a necessary precondition for their employment. Both upper-tier TMD systems, the Army's THAAD (Theater High-Altitude Area Defense) and the Navy's Theater Wide TMD, are apparently capable of operating as self-contained units. Hence, the hypothetical sale of an upper-tier system does not ipso facto require active U.S. involvement for the owners. I do not bring this up to argue for or against such sales per se, but merely to make the point.
A third common misunderstanding is a function of the terminology used to describe TMD. Many mistakenly take the word "Theater" in Theater Missile Defense to mean that TMD will protect (cover) the entire "theater" of a unified command, such as PACOM or CENTCOM. Not so. The word "Theater" really means that TMD is intended to be used for force protection within a specified "theater of war" or "theater of operations," both of which are vastly smaller areas geographically than a unified Commander-in-Chief's (CINC's) entire Area of Responsibility (AOR).
So to talk about TMD in a political context is difficult without also getting into a discussion that differentiates between different types of systems with different components that possess different theoretical capabilities. One has to walk one's way through discourses about lower-tier systems and upper-tier systems, ground-based systems, sea-based systems, air-borne systems, associated radars and C4I systems and the like. Consequently, discussions about TMD can very frustrating and degenerate quickly into exercises in rhetoric as systems are blurred, capabilities are confused or ignored, and arguments go in a straight line from lower-tier to upper-tier to even NMD systems, and from stand-alone systems to fully-integrated regional architectures.

BASIC CHINESE CONCERN ABOUT TMD: OPERATIONAL OR POLITICAL?

I do not think it would be unfair to say that the two principal reasons that the U.S. TMD program is now the subject of controversy in Asia are because: (1) China has been so consistently against the program and (2) because TMD became a matter of public debate in Taiwan beginning in 1999. The combination of those two elements alone is enough to make TMD a volatile chemical solution. When we add to the mixture calls from some sectors in the U.S. to throw a TMD-net over Taiwan, then we also have the potential for an exothermic reaction.
In the case of Taiwan, as mentioned earlier, China's ballistic missile threat would naturally make TMD an attractive system to consider. But in 1999 TMD became enmeshed in Taiwan domestic politics as the Legislative Yuan (LY) took up and debated the pros and cons of whether to consider "joining" the U.S. TMD program. The Taiwan debate was clearly a strictly notional and domestic debate because, to my knowledge, *Taiwan was never invited by the U.S. to join in the first place*! Pressure from the LY led in turn to vague statements from the Ministry of National Defense asserting that Taipei had "made no decisions" on the issue of pursuing participation in the U.S. TMD program but would not rule out considering it in the future. Clearly, this was a matter of domestic politics and domestic posturing. But clearly such debates raised the profile of U.S. TMD.
Beijing's opposition to TMD is long-standing, going back quite a few years by now. But I suspect that China's core objections to the program are, at this point, mainly political and mainly tied to Taiwan.
It is probably true that future U.S. TMD programs have the potential to cause PLA planners to worry about the viability of their conventional missile forces; an operational concern. But it is no secret that it is faster and cheaper to build more missiles than to build and buy more TMD systems. In other words some Chinese argue that the simplest antidote to TMD is to overwhelm it and some in China feel this would not be a problem for them. So while there are likely some operational concerns about TMD, they do not seem to be the core of China's objections. The core objections seem to be political.
So what are China's political concerns about TMD? As the Chinese articulate them, there are four key concerns:
· First, TMD will be shared with other U.S. allies in the region and serve as the technological glue for an anti-China coalition.
· Second, that sharing TMD with Japan will take Tokyo down the road to a more active military role in the region.
· Third, transferring TMD to Taiwan will encourage Taipei to continue to resist coming to terms with Beijing.
· Fourth, selling additional TMD systems to Taiwan will provide the technological codicil under which U.S.-Taiwan military cooperation will be resurrected.
Are there merits to these arguments or is this yet another case of "seeing an acorn but imagining the oak tree?" Let's consider each concern briefly.
· Sharing TMD with other U.S. allies in the region will serve as the technological glue for an anti-China coalition.
Other than Japan, it is unclear to me at this point that any of Washington's allies in the region are seriously interested in acquiring systems that have yet to be proven effective or even deployed. So far even Seoul has shown little interest. But the point is really that TMD as a system would hardly*drive* decisions that are really political in nature. Moreover, coalitions are usually not driven by technology but by shared political interests.
· Second, that sharing TMD with Japan will take Tokyo down the road to a more active military role in the region.
My thinking is that this is quite a lot to rest at the feet of TMD. Japan already has some lower-tier TMD systems. Would possessing upper-tier systems make a difference? Again, this is an open-ended question. Tokyo's future role in the region will surely rest upon Japanese domestic political decisions far greater than the hypothetical possession of new TMD systems.
· Third, transferring TMD to Taiwan will encourage Taipei to continue to resist coming to terms with Beijing.
Without prejudice to the issue of whether or not the U.S. *should* sell additional systems to Taiwan I would say that to the degree that possessing additional TMD systems might provide Taiwan with a *false* sense of military security, Beijing may have this one right. Yet, it is, I think, clear that the key to whether or not Beijing and Taipei can reach an accommodation transcends the questions of what offensive capabilities China can bring to bear or what defensive systems Taiwan can obtain to counter them.
· Finally, selling TMD to Taiwan will provide the technological codicil under which U.S.-Taiwan military cooperation will be resurrected.
Certainly, to the extent that there have been calls in the U.S. recently to expand military relations with Taiwan, one can appreciate why Beijing is voicing its concern. Yet, Beijing's argument that TMD would be a *driver* of what we might term "relationship creep" is a difficult proposition to accept. Clearly, a decision to revivify the defense relationship with Taiwan would engender serious policy questions about the basic U.S. stance toward China. It would likely initiate a serious debate in the U.S. and not be entered into cavalierly because one particular weapon system, defensive though it may be, holds out the prospect, on technical grounds, for a qualitatively different relationship.
To recapitulate then, the key Chinese concerns about TMD seem to be political, not operational. The most important political concerns revolve about Taiwan. And while some of these concerns speak to the realm of the "technically possible" none necessarily represent the "politically probable."
I would offer that that a good deal of the concern expressed by China about TMD in the Asia-Pacific region is as much about distrust of and uncertainty about U.S. strategic intentions as it is about the TMD systems themselves.

THE ISSUE OF FUTURE U.S. DEPLOYMENTS OF TMD SYSTEMS

The conference organizers indicate that at the last session in Tokyo, which I did not attend, there was a great deal of discussion among participants as to whether perceived U.S. threats in Asia justify "importing" TMD systems into the region. Other issues that came up, I am told, included the relative importance of DPRK versus Chinese missile threats as the impetus for TMD deployments, and what future U.S.TMD deployments to Asia may "signal" about U.S. regional intentions, especially toward China. I have been asked to comment on some of these issues and am happy to provide some personal opinions. Some of my views are implied in the discussion above. But allow me to address these questions more directly.

· The question of threats in the region to which the U.S. sees TMD as the necessary response.

The first point to make is that the U.S. has had TMD deployed in the Asia-Pacific for some time now. My understanding is that there have been batteries of Patriot missiles organic to U.S. Forces Korea for quite a couple of years; certainly since 1994 at the height of U.S.-DPRK tensions over North Korea's nuclear program. But I would argue that the dispatch of TMD to Korea under those circumstances was an act to demonstrate political resolve on the part of the U.S. vis-à-vis DPRK intransigence; not one of real military significance. As we all know, the major threat to Seoul is not missiles but conventional artillery. So the deployment of TMD batteries to South Korea was really a political act much as Patriot deployments to Israel during the Gulf War had more political and psychological impact than any real military relevance.
The second point I would make is that the purpose of TMD is not intended to be used as some convenient chess piece to be moved by diplomats or strategists to send political signals. Although the case of South Korea bespeaks otherwise, I would say that was an exceptional circumstance. In previous sections of this paper I have argued that the impetus for the development of TMD was not any particular country's missile capabilities. The impetus was the fact that the proliferation of conventional missiles had gotten to the point that there was a real generic threat that had to be dealt with for U.S. force protection. Events in Asia were neither the original impetus for TMD R & D *nor will Asia be the exclusive reason for TMD deployments.*
If at some point in the future the various TMD systems reach a mature state and are ready for incorporation into the U.S. armed forces then I suspect that they will be deployed to all U.S. forces.
It is important to remember that U.S. military forces around the world are assigned to various unified commands. Those unified commands are regionally oriented and based. *However,* it is absolutely critical to understand that those forces are geographically fungible. What I mean, for example, is that U.S. Navy assets assigned to the Pacific Command are as likely to be sent to the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, or the waters of South Asia in times of crisis as they are to be deployed into East or Northeast Asia.
So I think that it would be a mistake to draw any conclusions about U.S. intentions towards, or threat perceptions o, any particular country based on which unified commands or which units have which TMD systems at any future point in time. TMD assets deployed in the U.S. forces anywhere have the potential to be deployed everywhere in time of crisis or worse. So to talk about "importing" TMD into the region based on this threat or that is not necessarily how U.S. force planners view it.

· The question of how future U.S. TMD deployments might reflect U.S. strategic intentions toward China.

You may be disappointed to hear the argument that, in my view, it is highly unlikely that any future U.S. deployment of TMD assets in the Pacific Command's Area of Responsibility (AOR) would be a venue that the U.S. Government would choose to use to "signal" or "reflect" strategic intentions towards China. Why?
First, as I have suggested above, those PACOM assets can be deployed almost anywhere. Placing these assets in the PACOM AOR is not necessarily a very clear way, then, to make a very specific point.
Second, what kinds of TMD systems are we talking about? If land-based systems, then where would they be placed to send a signal that reflected U.S. strategic intentions toward China? In Korea? In Japan? In Australia? How about sea-based systems? If sea-based TMD systems are in the region, they are likely either in ports such as in Honolulu or in Japan or on the high seas. How can that signal strategic intentions? I do not see how.
Third, TMD is a conventional weapon system; an air defense system meant to defend against conventional missiles. It is for U.S. force protection and is not inherently offensive. Let's consider U.S. Navy TMD systems (yet to be developed and deployed, by the way). How would a ship-based missile meant to intercept incoming missiles send any different a signal or reflect strategic intentions in some greater way than the current sea-based missiles used to defense against aircraft?
Overall, then, I have a great deal of trouble accepting as a proposition that the future integration of TMD systems into U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific region (or beyond) will somehow reflect U.S. strategic intentions towards China.
Now, all of the discussion above has been focused on U.S. forces having TMD; not second parties. I have already mentioned that one of China's key concerns about TMD is in relation to Taiwan. So the question is, what would the hypothetical U.S. sale of mature TMD systems to Taiwan say about U.S. intentions toward China?
My answer to this question may also seem flippant but is *not* meant to be. And my response to this question is this: the hypothetical sale of U.S. TMD systems to Taiwan *would* not signal U.S. strategic intent toward China. However, such sales would be a significant indication of what Washington perceives China's intentions towards Taiwan to be.

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* This paper represents the personal analysis and opinion of the author only and should not be construed as the views of The CNA Corporation. This is an update to an earlier paper prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Center in October 2000.

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